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ABSTRACT

To shift the focus away from the writing instructor as the primary audience for written compositions, these writing assignments address the issue of audience directly. The assignments include the following: (1) select a magazine and analyze its audience; (2) compose a letter to the editor; (3) write an article for the selected magazine about an aspect of society depicted in a literary work currently being read by the class; and (4) using Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s "Cat's Cradle," write an article on an aspect of the country, customs, or people of San Lorenzo for a specific magazine with a specialized audience. Three sample student papers written for the fourth assignment are included. (SRT)

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FROM LANGUAGE TO LITERATURE AND PARTWAY-BACK
WRITING ASSIGNMENTS WHICH WORK*

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Donald E. Morse

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When I first began teaching composition as a graduate assistant at the University of Connecticut, linguistics was the assigned subject matter. The theory behind this choice was sound enough: since the medium of writing is language, the subject of writing should also be language. How I struggled through those obtuse essays on the origin, nature, and characteristics of language. What my students made of it, I'm sure I don't know. Later, I taught composition in another program using politically based argument and debate where I felt a little more at home with the subject, but still frustrated with the teaching of writing. In yet another semester-long course, I taught the short story as a way of having students analyze and then define their own points of view. I found all of this teaching enlightening, because I really did not know very much about composition or the teaching of writing.

Much later, and dozens of courses later, I restarted my career as a writing teacher under the heady influence of Ken Macrorie, Western Michigan University. I had just read **Up Taught** and so tried using his textbook, **Writing to be Read.** During those memorable terms I assigned no topics whatsoever—no political arguments, no short stories, and certainly no essays on language—but instead did free writing with my students about important moments in our lives, significant feelings we had had, and attempted—sometimes with excellent results—to recapture feelings, moods, and reactions to people, places, and ideas. At the time I also read articles and one or two books which shared Macrorie's view of the writing process. The most memorable of these, Peter Elbow, **Writing Without Teachers**, had wonderfully literate complex sentences to talk about writing. But mostly in this and other books the students spoke in their own clear voices about times in their lives which were important to them. Since my teaching of literature at that time was becoming more and more reader centered, I was able to mix and match Macrorie's free writing from personal experience, with reader response theory (which claims that all meaning resides in and is created by the writer's audience). The result I felt at the time was successful teaching of literature and successful teaching of writing and today I still recall many of those student papers and discussions with great pleasure.

Current Practice

In the last few years, however, I've put some of these techniques into a longer perspective and while I still use them I have begun to employ some older methods, such as copying, dictation, and given situations. What I found lacking in those earlier efforts of either focusing on languages as a medium for writing or focusing exclusively on the method of writing was that neither addressed the issue of audience directly. The neglected question, "For whom am I writing?" if dealt with at all was answered in the first instance with "I'm writing for the teacher" and in the second with "for myself." To shift the focus away from me, the teacher, as primary audience, toward other potential audiences I devised several exercises and structured assignments.

Letters to the Editor

One of the most successful assignments I and several of my colleagues have given recently is the letter to the editor. In giving this assignment I never specify

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which editor or what topic a student should write on--perhaps I'm still drawing on Macrorie's notion that people write best when internally motivated for then their language becomes sharp, clear, more pointed, and more personal as they become involved in the situation they write about.

In order to write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or a magazine, people have to be concerned about an issue, incident, or person. It's not enough just to "spout off," one has to communicate effectively whatever emotion he or she may be experiencing. Opinion can't be merely sprayed over a page but arguments must be carefully structured. To be taken seriously the letter must use language effectively. A recent Shoe cartoon by Jeff McNally illustrates this point. In a series of three frames, Shoe, the editor of a tree top newspaper sits down at his new word-processor and begins typing out tomorrow's editorial: "Once again this newspaper views with alarm the..."when he is interrupted by a huge "BLIP!!" "Hey!! What happened?" he yells, "My editorial was erased!!" To which the computer answers: "Once again this computer views with alarm your tired shopworn cliches."

Last year as I meandered down the usually barren corridor between my office and the water fountain I grew increasingly delighted with the original non-cliche writings appearing on my colleagues' office doors as they tacked up newspaper or magazine publication of their students' letters to the editor. One truly memorable clipping featured two students from the same class arguing opposite sides of whether Pine Knob should be granted a liquor license or not. Both letters used evidence convincingly, both argued well, and both were prominently featured accompanied by a photograph of Pine Knob picnickers.

Part of the fun of this assignment for me is that over a four to six week period, published letters dribble in about two or three a week, as they begin to appear in papers and magazines. One student triumphantly handed in her lead editorial letter from **The Detroit Free Press!** Besides the Detroit papers students discover their local hometown or county-based papers are always on the lookout for well written letters. Several of my students, for example, published in **The Macomb Daily** and **The Oakland Press.** Subjects of the student letters ranged from the predictable, "Buy American and Save Jobs" to the unpopular, "Robots Can Be Good For Industry—and Jobs," from the political, "Should Government Help the Poor?" to the practical, "Stray Dogs a Problem." Of course, none of these titles appeared on their original letters—all were invented by whoever composed the editorial page—many students were surprised and delighted by their headlines. Some found their letters illustrated with a cartoon or photograph which also gave them the feeling they were being taken seriously.

Teaching the Concept of Audience

While writing letters to the editor may perhaps be familiar, I suspect the next structured assignment is not. This assignment involves creating a context in which the students choose their own topics and identify their own audiences.

The concept of the writer's audience is important, subtle, elementary, yet often frustrating to teach. Without a clear notion of the person or group for whom we are writing, our point may become lost, our prose meander off in irrelevant directions, and our language lapse into vague generalities. As Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked, "There is nothing so absurd as the answer to a question you did not ask." Becoming aware of the specific audience for a piece of writing can, therefore, go a long way towards helping students give focus, coherence, and precision to their writing as well as helping them discover the basis for selecting relevant evidence and pertinent examples.

Here is a simple assignment which can help young writers understand the concept and importance of audience.

The General Assignment

Ask each member of the class to select a magazine and analyze its audience. Who buys the magazine and why? Going into a doctor's waiting room, why would you pick up **Time** instead of **Vogue**? Why would you read **Jack and Jill** instead of **Geographic World**? When we pick up an issue of

Cricket, what do we expect to find inside? When we go to the drug store and purchase **Mad Magazine** rather than **Newsweek**, what are we looking for? If we go back two days later and buy **Newsweek**, what do we hope to discover?

In-Class Writing Assignment with Leading Questions

Write an article for **Time**, **National Geographic** or **Geographic World** or for **Psychology Today** based upon your reading of or an extrapolation from Lewis Carroll's **The Jabberwocky.**

Time

In which Department of **Time** Magazine will your article appear? Why do people read that particular department? If you are doing a news story, for example, what are the salient features your audience will want to know? What is the event you are reporting? The main characters? The action? What implications do you draw from this event? If you are doing an editorial or an opinion piece, then ask what event triggered your discussion? What effect do you want your audience to feel or experience as they read your editorial? Augustine once remarked, "The end of right thinking is right action." What action would you hope your audience might take after reading your editorial?

Geographic World or National Geographic

What exotic place or creatures have you visited which you think your audience might enjoy knowing about? What are their customs? What are their ways? Have you any photographs for this article? How did you travel to this particular land to get your story? What obstacles were placed in your way? Would the audience wish to go there on a visit? Is the purpose of your article to encourage or discourage such visits? Or, are you trying perhaps to share with your audience an important new discovery in the animal kingdom, such as a Bandersnatch? Have you any suggestions for further exploration, or do you believe there is a need to curtail exploration? Are there any implications for our life today in what you have seen or experienced?

Psychology Today

Do the relationships pictured in the poem mirror those found elsewhere, or are they aberrations? For example, are they the boundary cases by which we can measure our own shortcomings or achievements? In the encounter between the young man and the Jabberwock or in the relationship between the son and his father, are there implications for your audience's lives? What kind of human relationships are illustrated here? What are your credentials for examining these relationships? What background do you bring to your story that will lead your audience to trust what you say? Are there wider implications for our time, for our society in your discoveries?

JABBERWOCKY

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
  And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
  The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
  The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
  Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
  And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
  The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
  And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
  The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
  He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
  Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
  He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

From Lewis Carroll,
Through The Looking Glass

Two Out-of-Class Assignments

The second part of the exercise is to take a work of imaginative literature, which the class is currently reading, and ask students to write an article for their chosen magazine about an aspect of the society pictured in the work. The first assignment is based on C. S. Lewis and is designed for Elementary, Junior High School or Middle School.

A. Read and discuss **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader** by C. S. Lewis. (The book's memorable characters, intriguing incidents, and compelling plot will sustain most students' interest. Lewis' book is readily available in paperback and several students may have read other volumes in "The Chronicles of Narnia" series.)

B. Select a magazine and analyze its audience. Why do people read this magazine? Why would they buy it rather than another one? What do they hope to learn from reading it?

C. Write an article for your chosen magazine about some character or incident in **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.** Here are some examples:

Life magazine interviews Reepicheep

"Dragon Island Explored," **Geographic World**

"My Life as a Dragon," **Cricket**

"Dufflepuds as Models For Us All," opinion, **Time**

The second assignment uses Kurt Vonnegut and is appropriate for seniors and juniors in high school to sophomores in college.

After reading and discussing Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s **Cat's Cradle** (New York, 1963), do the following:

A. Write an article on whatever aspect you choose of the country, customs, or people of San Lorenzo for a specific magazine. Length: anything over 500 words or two typed pages.

B. Choose any magazine you wish except ones such as **TV Guide**, **People** or **Reader's Digest** that specialize either in reprinting other magazines' articles or in running brief notices rather than whole articles.

C. Write for the audience for this specific magazine. People read **Ebony**, **Fortune**, and **Time** for different reasons than they might read **The New Yorker**, **True Romance** or **Holiday.** If you want to do something "far out," go ahead and try. (**Cosmo** on Frank and Mona, **Barron's** on the San Lorenzo economy, **Field & Stream** on barracuda fishing, or **Your Health** on Julian Castle are a few suggestions.) Your approach may be modeled on a carefully researched, clearly structured article such as Paul Jacob's "What You Don't Know May Hurt You," or on a savage satire such as Swift's "A Modest Proposal," or on anything in between. It is up to you.

Sample Student Papers Using Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle

Here are three sample student papers written for the audiences of three different magazines. Each writer analyzed the audience and each attempts to reach it. All papers are fun to read.

Untitled

Sally M. Bacon, Student

Written for Cosmopolitan

Just when you thought the age of gorgeous sex-queens was reaching its end, **Cosmo** brings you MONA.

Queen among the disease, lies, and corruption of the jungle of San Lorenzo, Mona reigned unconcerned, cool, and socially unconscious. How can we help but envy and admire someone whose name adorns the tufts of a bedspread? In her day, Mona

was slightly void of emotion, but with looks like hers, emotion is unnecessary. "Something" about her commanded immediate lust from males. "Love," it was frequently referred to by Mona and others. With all her lack of anything above the neck, she certainly had some ideas about love, and they did not correlate with those of Miss Faust, who was sure that God was love. Mona figured she owed every man a totally equal share of her love. Since she had a vast amount of love to give, she appeared slightly promiscuous. But, Mona shamelessly reveled in her promiscuity. Girls, she must be the true representative of female spirituality that we have been searching so long for, (why else would you be reading this magazine?) In her own weird country, her command of beauty (everyone else was sick or ugly,) of the xylophone, and of boku-maru, has made her a symbol for all woman-kind. Unfortunately, the secrets of boku-maru will never be discovered, they were put into a deep freeze by ice-nine as was most of San Lorenzo.

Mona inspired one source to write a short ditty that, yes, was reminiscent of Shakespeare. This dears, is the essence of true femininity we all must achieve. Having a fate no less than to marry the son of the creator of the atomic bomb; or the president of San Lorenzo, whichever came first. Living through the destruction of San Lorenzo, watching it freeze to death, and dying a heroic suicidal death.

I'm sure that by now you are extremely mournful over the death of Mona. But, take a clue from Mona herself, and ignore such tragic things as death. Dead though she is, Mona will light our way.

"A Conservative Proposal"

Eric Ruedisueli, Student

Written for National Review

In San Lorenzo, "...you can lay a billfold in the middle of a sidewalk and you can come back a week later and it will still be right there, with everything still in it," a friend of mine once told me while discussing the United States judicial system. I undoubtedly replied, "Surely the people must be rich, or the population sparse." "On the contrary," continued my friend with a wide grin, for he was more than happy to explain, "San Lorenzo's annual income per person is between six and seven dollars, and there are 450 people per square mile." Of course my next question was, "How can a zero crime rate exist?"

He proceeded to tell about the island of San Lorenzo, and its perfect solution to get rid of crime. A law-breaker isn't sent to prison for twenty years, neither is he out on the streets on probation, any criminal either murderer or shoplifter is given "the hook." The hook is made up of two strong vertical posts, with a horizontal crossbar at the top, and a giant fishhook hanging down from the crossbar. Whoever breaks the law has the point of the hook stuck in one side of his belly and out the other. He'll hang there for all to see with his guts spilling out. "It's very effective," commented my acquaintance.

The island's dictator, Miguel "Papa" Manzano, is a clever man indeed, his judicial system seems far more effective than ours. In the United States the prisons are becoming overcrowded. Three Michigan prisons broke out into uncontrollable riots, and criminals are being released from prison months before the end of their sentences because of these crowded conditions.

Capital punishment by means of an electric chair is a good idea, but "the hook" (which needs no electricity, therefore, saving energy in these energy conscious days,) would solve many problems.

Since all criminals will be punished by the hook, there will be no need for large costly prisons. Existing prisons could be made into complexes for senior citizens, unwed mothers, or battered wives. The expense of feeding prisoners and prison maintenance could be put toward a more needy purpose. The prison guards could increase the police force to patrol our communities more effectively. Of course a shortage of license plates might develop in Michigan, but then this would allow more jobs for useful members of society. Other benefits from "Papa" Monzano's hook are quite evident. The hook can be made inexpensively, it doesn't take much room, and after only a few criminals

the hook will pay for itself when the state sells the mutilated carcasses to fertilizer manufacturers, or hot dog companies.

San Lorenzo is a perfect example, law-breakers will realize crime doesn't pay, because no fool would be stupid enough to commit a crime with "the hook" in effect.

Capital punishment might eliminate the criminal, whereas "the hook" eliminates the crime.

"Sole to Soul"

Lynn G. Keinath, Student

Written for Newsweek

First it was transcendental meditation, then bio-feedback, now it's boko-maru, the forbidden fruit of San Lorenzo, a banana-boat country somewhere south of the equator. Boko-maru, a sophisticated version of playing footsies, allows two people to mingle their souls by rubbing the bottoms of their feet together. The method is similar to driving a very small, five-speed sports car; first you press on the clutch, let it out, then step on the gas, and repeat. By the time you reach overdrive, you're in heaven!

Psychologists and clergymen alike scoff at the new passion-pedaling, claiming the results only resemble a crude form of energy transference, at the very most. Yet, sociologists disagree. They explain that in San Lorenzo, a capitalist's nightmare, boko-maru is part of an illegal religion, which makes it irresistable. The crowded population is so poor that material wealth is beyond comprehension. The natives' only chance for that Harry Belafonte feeling comes through boko-maru.

Of course, I have been been above trying a new fad; so I attempted some fancy footwork of my own. Just as I was nearing the absolute high, my Scandinavian blue-eyed, blond partner became a little over-zealous, launching me off our experimental pad, leaving me quite unsatisfied and deeply annoyed. I would advise never trying boko-maru with a person of northern European descent.

However, America seems ready for the new pastime. In California, where the sun turns out thousands of Coppertone tans, the residents have traded in their roller skates for Dr. Scholl's newest product, Orthopedic Stompers for Two, a silly-looking sandal that joins two people like Siamese twins by their soles. Roman Polanski announced his latest film, "If Juan Valdez Could See Me Now," featuring many of Hollywood's top stars indulging in boko-maru, orgy-style. Hugh Hefner censored his bare-breasted bunnies, dedicating his June centerfold to a sensual shot of Rita Jenrette's intoxicating instep. Naturally, President Reagan did not want his public to think he was a heel, when he and the first lady attended the American Podiatrists Association luncheon bare-footed. Even Andy Rooney admits boko-maru is the hottest thing since sock hops.

So, if this smelly trend continues to catch on, maybe the world will lay down their guns and raise their feet, heel and toeing their way towards peace. Anything is possible. By the way, have you boko-marued your kid today?

Conclusion

These papers, whose quality varies from good to excellent, are typical for this assignment. Each reflects a knowledge of and appreciation for audience. For many students, this assignment comes as a welcome change from other more academic topics. I also use it in sequence with Swift's "Modest Proposal" and a carefully researched article on a controversial social or political topic in order to provide a range of models for student writing, but the real choice lies in the students' reading. Moreover, the students enjoy writing on this topic as much as I enjoy reading what they write which is an admirable arrangement.

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